AUTOBIOGRAPHY

THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT*

Paz Policarpio Mendez

I was four months pregnant when my mother remarked that I was too big for four months. She suspected twins. My obstetrician, Dr. Rustia, ordered an x-ray and it proved my mother right. I shouldn't have been too surprised because my cousin Ate Sulang had also had twins, both girls.

The real surprise for me and everybody else was that I produced a boy and a girl, both of normal weight. Eloisa, whom we called Lisa, was born first; Ruben, or Ben, emerged twenty minutes later. Between the two births, Dr. Rustia went to another room to deliver Eulalia, daughter of my friend Mrs. Pilar Hidalgo Lim.

Ben and Lisa were the answers to our other children's prayers. Manuel wanted a baby brother, and Sylvia wanted a baby sister.

As if the twins were not enough, another baby, Carlo, came a year later. Our midwife, Miss Calzado, needed three hands. But she was extremely fond of the Mendez tots and took care of them for about eight years. When Nina, our youngest (better known as Popsy, short for Popsicle), was born six years after Carlo, Miss Calzado was still with us like a member of the family. She not only attended to the children but acted as *mayordoma.*

And well did I need a *mayordoma*-midwife. I had no intention of giving up my social and intellectual activities to be a full-time housewife-mother. I had always believed that every woman should have a career outside the home. I was aware, however,

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* Chapter II in the autobiography of Dr. Paz Policarpio Mendez entitled *A String of Pearls.*

that Filipino working mothers were at a disadvantage because every time they went on leave to have their babies, they were compelled by law to stay away from work much longer than necessary, while receiving no salaries. I was convinced that a law was needed which would allow a woman on maternity leave to collect her salary in full.

The low status of women had disturbed me ever since my father ran for *presidente* of San Isidro. There I was, a mere teenager, teaching our male tenants to write so they could qualify as voters, while the literate adult women in town were forbidden to cast their ballots. As I was growing up, I became more aware of other institutional obstructions to the progress of Filipino women.

I was not alone in my desire to see the Filipino woman uplifted and appreciated as a citizen of both her country and the world. Among others who had the same vision were the founders of the Philippine Association of University Women (PAUW) in 1928. All graduates of the University of the Philippines, they transcended their exclusive loyalty to their alma mater by opening membership to all female college graduates regardless of creed, political affiliation, race, and language. As years passed, the PAUW was able to organize sister chapters in other regions of the country, and eventually became affiliated with the International Association of University Women.

The PAUW charter embodied goals based on the principles of tolerance, international understanding, and world peace. The chief aims of the PAUW were to promote fellowship among the alumnae of different colleges and universities; to ensure the maintenance of high professional standards among working women; to promote education for women and encourage them to do research; to cooperate with other agencies for the protection of women's welfare; to encourage interest and active participation in public affairs; to encourage leadership training among women through contact with women's organizations in other countries; to cooperate with women of other nations in the promotion and maintenance of world peace.

Soon after the founding of the PAUW, I received an invitation from one of its founding members, the wealthy and eminent physician Dr. Maria Paz Mendoza-Guazon, to join the association. I accepted and was immediately elected to the board of directors,

young as I was, perhaps because there were very few members at the time. Dr. Mendoza — she was better known by her maiden name — was elected president and Dr. Encarnacion Alzona, who had graduated in the United States, was elected vice-president.

The PAUW published an official monthly organ called *The Woman's World* (formerly *The Dawn*), which had its editorial and advertising offices rent-free in Dr. Mendoza's apartment on Herran street in Paco. She was the magazine's managing editor, while contributing editors were Encarnacion Alzona, Emilia Malabanan, Ursula Uichanco, Anne Guthrie, Asuncion Perez, A. Lopez Arguelles, and myself. At 15 centavos per issue, it was an elegant magazine. Sometimes its covers showed reproductions of paintings by Fernando Amorsolo, Fabian de la Rosa, Dominador Castaneda, and Anita Magsaysay.

I was one of the more active staff members of the *Woman's World*. I wrote editorials on significant topics, sometimes as many as three editorials in one issue. I also wrote a column entitled "Correct English" and another one entitled "In the Social Graces," as well as articles on such topics as heroines of the Philippine Revolution, the college girl as a wife, gardening and flowers, the political situation in Russia and the high status of women therein. I was so prolific a writer that I had to use pseudonyms to disguise my authorship of so many articles in the same issue. My columns on parenting were bylined "Pacita de San Juan." I used the pseudonym "Sylvia de la Riva" for "In the Social Graces." And to show how much I had advanced in the culinary arts, I contributed recipes, also as Pacita de San Juan. Sometimes I simply omitted my byline.

In November 1935 I became editor of the *Woman's World*. Some years later, the magazine was incorporated with the *Woman's Home Journal*, and the publication went by the name *Woman's Home Journal-World*.

The magazine reflected my views on controversial issues of the day, especially on woman suffrage and maternity leave. In my editorial "Penalizing Motherhood" (*Woman's World*, April 1936) I protested against compulsory maternity leaves and other legal impositions on prospective mothers. I complained that pregnant teachers were compelled to go on six months' leave without pay —two months before and four months after delivery. In the Bureau of Education the expiration of the leave had to coincide with the

beginning or the end of the semester, sometimes forcing the mother to go on leave without pay for one year. Childless or not, a married nurse could not seek employment in the government. These policies were apparently copies of similar policies in the U.S., but I argued that there was no comparison between the two countries because in the Philippines it was easy and inexpensive to get help from maids and relatives.

At the time I wrote this editorial, the Philippines was underpopulated and greatly in need of human resources. The compulsory maternity leave, in my opinion, would discourage working women from having children. I felt it would be disastrous for the country to have professional women limiting themselves to intellectual pursuits, leaving childbearing to women in the fields and the slums.

When we were lobbying for the maternity bill, I learned to my chagrin that some legislators we had counted on were not dependable. So I mustered enough courage to call on Speaker Jose Yulo. Since I had no appointment, I sent a note saying I wanted to see him for only two minutes. To my delight he sent for me and my companion almost immediately. When I presented the case of the maternity bill, he replied right away, "I realize the justice of your cause. I myself was brought up by a sister who was a teacher. We will pass the maternity bill."

President Quezon eventually signed the Maternity Bill into law, providing for compensation to married women on maternity leave. When the law was passed, I felt as if I had successfully delivered another child, for the Maternity Bill had in fact started out as my baby.

As for the road to woman suffrage, that too was filled with stumbling blocks. In 1931 a bill granting Filipino women the right to vote was approved in the lower house but disapproved in the Senate. The following year the bill was revived in the Senate, only to be shelved for unstated reasons. Gov. Gen. Murphy believed in woman suffrage and encouraged us to campaign for it with all our might, but the senators apparently thought we were indifferent simply because we discussed our rights at tea parties, unlike the American suffragettes, who had marched in rallies and carried placards demanding the vote. Moreover, the legislators were too

busy debating the Hare-Hawes-Cutting Law to consider women's rights.

I requested my husband, then editor of the *Philippines Herald* and the *Monday Mail*, to write editorials upholding woman suffrage, and he did. Although in the early months of our marriage he had objected to my speaking engagements, he had apparently resigned himself to my enthusiastic participation in public affairs. I believe he secretly admired me for it. He wrote editorials condemning the Filipino male's treatment of the female "as a piece of property to have and to hold."

The Hare-Hawes-Cutting Law was rejected in 1933, giving the legislature enough time to reconsider the bill on woman suffrage. The senators inserted an amendment to the bill, providing that if it was passed into law it would not be effective until four years later, in 1937 to be exact, unless special elections were held in the intervening time. The amendment was just another strategy for delaying the women's right to vote.

The women were nonetheless thankful for the gesture. Gov. Gen. Murphy signed the bill into law on Dec. 6, 1933, in the presence of such distinguished ladies as Aurora Quezon, Pilar Hidalgo Lim, Pura Villanueva Kalaw, Asuncion Perez, Sofia de Veyra, Josefa Jara Martinez, and Josefa Llanes Escoda. Not entirely satisfied with the law, I chose to meet my classes at the U.P. instead of going to Malacanang to watch the signing.

About 200,000 Filipino women voted for the first time in 1935, when they ratified the constitution of the Commonwealth. The irony of it was that the same constitution took away our voting rights. We had placed the nation's interest above our own by ratifying the constitution, but this was not the end of our battle for suffrage.

Fortunately, a plebiscite to amend the constitution by granting woman suffrage was scheduled for 1937. I then put all my heart and soul into the campaign for a "yes" vote at the plebiscite. The objects of my editorials were not the men but the women who seemed not to care. I wrote that if 300,000 women were to vote for suffrage at the plebiscite the following year, we would have it.

"Shall we fail ourselves?" I asked. I pointed to the Englishwomen who had to storm Parliament, break the glass windows of public buildings, and create other forms of disturbance before

they were given the ballot. American women held parades and indignation meetings, some even risking jail for espousing the cause. Women in other countries literally had to fight for the ballot. Filipino women, on the other hand, did not have to resort to violent means, yet many failed to realize this advantage.

I noted that since 1918 many countries, progressive and otherwise, had been giving their women the right to vote. The only large European countries that had not enfranchised their women were France and Italy. Dictator Mussolini was of course not expected to be kind to women. But small countries and newly created states like Latvia, Lithuania, Czechoslovakia, Finland, Poland, Estonia, the Irish Free State and Ecuador already had woman suffrage. So did Siam, China, and India. "A study of social legislation in various countries shows that the greatest progress came in the wake of woman suffrage," I wrote.

The official campaign for the woman suffrage plebiscite began in September 1936, when the General Council of Women, composed of representatives of the various women's organizations in the country, sounded the first call to arms. I was quite annoyed when the Director of the Civil Service ruled that suffrage was a political question and that therefore teachers in the Civil Service could not campaign for or against it. I held that the interpretation was unjust to the large body of intelligent women who comprised the teaching force of the public schools.

My argument was that woman suffrage was neither a partisan question nor a political issue. It had passed from the hands of politicians and legislators into the hands of our womenfolk, who were now entirely free to decide whether to vote or not to vote. If we could not muster 300,000 affirmative votes on Plebiscite Day, we would consider the Director of Civil Service guilty of having frustrated our cause.

The plebiscite of April 1937 resulted in a landslide vote in favor of woman suffrage. But celebrating our victory was not enough, in my opinion. I enjoined the readers of the *Woman's World* to approach their new right with a profound sense of responsibility. I said it would not do for them to feign ignorance or to "pass the buck" to the men, for they — the women — had become part and parcel of Philippine democracy. The success or failure of our government would be as much theirs as the men's.

In late 1938 I received a phone call from a PAUW member informing me of a plan to elect me president of the association. Taken by surprise, I declined the offer, with the support of Mauro. In the first place, I feared I could not equal the prestige of the two distinguished women who had served as PAUW president — Dr. Maria Paz Mendoza-Guazon and Dr. Encarnacion Alzona. In the second place, my husband felt that the PAUW presidency would take up too much of the time and attention my family needed from me.

After having declined the nomination, I began to ponder what I would have done if I had accepted. I had been in the mainstream of PAUW activities, especially as editor of the *Woman's World* and the PAUW journal. My editorials had advocated the promotion of Filipino women's rights in the legal, political, social, and educational fields, but most of them had remained as printer's ink.

As luck would have it, the election was postponed, thus affording me the opportunity of accepting the presidency when it was offered again. Although a reluctant president, I immersed myself in the problems of the young association. I first embarked on the task of increasing membership and persuading members to attend the monthly meetings. I called them up personally many times and even held meetings on Sundays because the members, being professionals, worked during the week. What further increased the membership was our practice of holding meetings in the various Manila universities. This was the prelude to the PAUW chapters that were organized later.

The metropolitan press cooperated with us in our pro-women activities. Having a journalist for a husband made it that much easier for me to put the association in the limelight, especially as our projects were indeed worthy of support: the revision of laws prejudicial to women, scholarships for non-Christian college girls; the appointment of women to high positions in the judicial, executive, and legislative branches of government. The time came when not only society-page editors but also reporters and newspaper editors called us up for the latest on PAUW projects which they could feature in the news and the editorials.

Our committee on laws, headed by lawyer Alejandra Antonio, met many times to suggest replacements for the provisions in the old Civil Code which discriminated against women. Our labors,

which lasted well into the post-war period, were crowned with success. I recall distinctly what President Manuel Roxas told a PAUW lobby group: "Mrs. Mendez, I can assure you that you will get not only what you are asking for; we will revamp the entire Civil Code."

There was no national topic on which the PAUW did not have an opinion, for or against. Some of them are worth mentioning here, such as the Philippine-Chinese Treaty of Amity and Friendship, for which we proposed an in-depth study before implementation. We were against the establishment of Chinese schools in the country for they stressed loyalty to China rather than to the Philippines. (This defect was remedied in the 1973 Constitution.) We also urged the establishment of a Court of Domestic Relations, a Nutrition Center, and nursery schools.

The one topic I avoided in our deliberations was divorce. To me the subject was tinged with deep religious and emotional overtones that would have divided our members. Consensus seemed far better than heated debates; after all, there were many other issues we could support unanimously.

It was in the field of women's rights and welfare that PAUW accomplished a great deal. We recommended and worked for the approval of the Paraphernal Property Law, which empowers the wife to alienate, encumber or mortgage her paraphernal property without her husband's consent. We inspired the Tirona Bill (in the Senate) and the Ricohermoso-Fortich Bill (in the House of Representatives) requiring a wife's written consent before her husband can dispose of their conjugal real estate property. We worked for the retention of the classification of children as legitimate, natural, and illegitimate *only* in the Civil Registry, and the abolition of such a classification in the issuance of baptismal certificates, marriage licenses, passports, etc. We believed that the State needed the classification only for purposes of record and that no birth stigma should be attached to a person throughout his or her life.

We recommended the admission of more evidence in establishing the paternity of natural children. We advocated full freedom for the wife to engage in business, although she had to get her husband's consent if she wished to alienate or encumber conjugal property. We removed all provisions pertaining to the dowry system which were contrary to Filipino marriage practices.

For all that, PAUW was not narrowly feminist. Its projects contributed to the people at large. We obtained donations for the recreation, comfort, and aid of disabled war veterans at the Quezon Institute; got a better deal for war widows and orphans; recommended the passage of a law requiring subdivision owners to set aside a portion of their estates for public playgrounds; brought about the conversion of certain narrow streets in crowded districts into temporary playgrounds by closing them to traffic at certain hours of the day.

The PAUW was my first great love, after teaching. I sensed something in this community of intellectuals that rose above mundane things, above selfish ambitions. The PAUW showed the country what an unselfish, alert, purposeful womanhood could do to help in nation-building. For this reason, when my husband brought his family to the U.S. years later, I chose to devote more time to the American Association of University Women (AAUW) than to the other organizations which invited me to speak. In such congenial company I could only feel at home.